

LADY OR MERMAID? An Essay on Ibsen's "The Lady from the Sea"

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ABSTRACT. In the paper some aspects of Ibsen's "The Lady from the Sea" are presented. The author discusses a radio version of the drama made by the Norwegian director Hans Heiberg, and compares it with Ibsen's original text.

The creator of modern psychological drama, Henrik Ibsen, was, in his later years, extremely conscious of all details, all those small, configurative elements that make his dramas into textures of expressive language and visual details – especially those the English scholar John Northam described as "visual suggestions". In a radio version there will of course be problems with the reshaping and subsequent rendering of these visual elements, and the stage director or the dramatic adviser will have to find other means. "Fruen fra havet" – "The Lady from the Sea" is one of Ibsen's most poetic dramas, and it is hardly surprising that the director Hans Heiberg, when he made a radio version for the Norwegian radio theatre some decades ago, accentuated the poetic elements of the drama. Some three years ago the same theatre made a new performance, and it was based on Heiberg's version.

This version contains some interesting changes compared to Ibsen's original text. The clue is the dialogue of "the lady from the sea", Ellida Wangel, and her husband with the foreign sailor as a fateful intruder. This conflicting dialogue is contrasted by the more trifling discussions between Dr Wangel's daughter Bolette (Ellida is his second wife) and her former private tutor Arnholm. The juicy characterizations of this small town society made by Ballested, the local jack-of-all-trades, are completely omitted by Heiberg, and thereby the satirical elements of Ibsen's text disappear. This effect is accentuated by another change. The naive and self-conscious sculptor Lyngstrand, who in the original text is mainly a comedy figure, has a reduced part, his function being to introduce the motif of the sailor's rival (one of the main motifs in the drama), and of conveying some important information to

the main character. Bolette's sister Hilde also has a minor part, as a sensitive young girl. Her attraction to danger and dangerous events, which is presented in a dialogue with Lyngstrand in the fifth act, and which is the connection to her function in Ibsen's later drama "Byggmester Solness", is left out in this version.

In this way the text becomes much more homogeneous than Ibsen's original, with the lyrical-psychological dialogue between Ellida and Wangel constituting the backbone element and Bolette's and Arnholm's relationship as a sufficient contrast and accompaniment.

The fact that Ballested is left out also has other consequences. He is a kind of stage director, who launches the play, as it were, with his fresh remarks. He intrudes into the plot in short, rapid sequences, which sharply contrast with the slowly flowing dialogue of the main plot. What I especially want to underline is that this elimination also separates the radio listener from his short, but important entrance towards the end of the play. In this version Ellida's three final replies are eliminated, but the important fourth reply from the end has also been changed:

Ellida: *"Do you remember what we were speaking of yesterday? When you have once and for all become a land-animal - you can never find the way back again - out to the sea."*

"Nor to the sea-life either",

Ibsen's original continues.

Heiberg's poetic conclusion leaves the ocean sound alone, with all the associative richness which has been created around this word, and which the short pause before the four words - "out to the sea" - accentuates even more. Ibsen's continuation is, from a logical point of view, more precise, but it rather spoils the concentrated atmosphere. It however leads to Ballested's conclusive reflections about the mermaid. By this, the connection is made to the opening of the drama, which Heiberg simply leaves out, when Ballested is painting a seascape with a "half-dead mermaid" who has "strayed in from the sea and cannot find her way out again. So she lies here dying by inches in the brackish water, you understand", he explains to Lyngstrand. It is this picture that is reactivated in the final scene. It is related to the above-mentioned "visual suggestions, in other words, psychic phenomena indicated by visual effects. This double meaning is manifested throughout the whole play, the drama of the lady from the sea is framed by that of Ballested's mermaid.

We may ask if these two are quite synonymous. Is it a mere coincidence that the drama was not called "The Mermaid"? Ballested's following reflections may throw light on this question: *"Only with this difference, that the mermaid - she dies of it. Human beings - on the contrary - they can acclaim-accli-matise themselves. Yes, I assure you, Mrs Wangel, they can ac-cli-matise themselves."*

The drama fades out with the words that are often quoted to characterise Ellida's development and victory:

Ellida: *"Yes, in freedom they can, Mr Ballested."*

Wangel: *"And under full responsibility, dear Ellida."*

And the new bargain between Ellida and her husband is signed:

Ellida (quickly, holding out her hand to him): *"That is the secret."* (The great steamer glides noiselessly - down the fiord. The music is heard closer inshore.)

A happy ending, in other words, not so frequent in Ibsen's dramas. But is there not in Ballested's last reply something that disturbs this victory of reason and responsibility? Apart from the bizarre effect created by his problems with the pronunciation of difficult words, he foreshadows what Ibsen some years later in the drama "Lille Eyolf" in the phrase "forvandlingens lov" – the law of transformation – that all human feelings, especially the erotic ones, undergo a constant transformation.

In this representation, Ballested's reply becomes a quite neutral statement. It may be interpreted as emphasizing that the human being is not nature, in other words that the picture Ballested has painted, and which is some kind of emblem for the drama, is a parallel to Ellida's development only superficially. But it may also be interpreted in another way, which is directly connected with the pun in the title: the possibility that something is lost by the victory of reason, the lady from the sea appears to be more a lady than from the sea.

A final solution to this equivocation will probably never be found. Ballested's last reply is open, it may be interpreted as an enthusiastic declaration that mankind can conquer the dictatorship of instincts, and as a more resigned acknowledgment of mankind's power to pulverize its emotional origin. The last aspect is strengthened if we look at Ballested himself. He is an artist who in this small town society has to do whatever is requested. He behaves much like a clown in order to survive.

The conclusive replies from Ellida and her husband undoubtedly support the first interpretation, but there may, of course, be differences between what a person says about him or herself, and the author's opinion. This becomes even more evident in the later play "Lille Eyolf", where there are strong reasons to believe that the author questions the harmonious end. Heiberg's version eliminates the problems in the final scene. May it still contain an interpretation of this problem? The equivocation is maintained, happiness and sorrow are balanced, the pedestrian trivialization that Ibsen's final replies easily effect, is avoided.

So this way of handling the problem is perhaps quite fortunate, even if it, together with a lot of other changes, partly makes Heiberg's "The Lady from the Sea" a play different from the original. In the low-voiced, lyrical dialogue on the radio the noisy Ballested would have been a foreign body, but it is important to emphasize that this drama in Ibsen's shaping is a tragi-comedy, and that it continues the alternation of "The Wild Duck" between fate drama and low comedy.

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